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Exploring the relationship between family migration and social stratification through the investigation of women's labour market experiences in contemporary Britain

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Family migration and social stratification

Vernon Gayle
Paul Boyle and Robin Flowerdew
Andrew Cullis

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between family migration (i.e. couples with or without children moving home) and social stratification in Britain. The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of family migration on social stratification using contemporary large-scale nationally representative data.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper investigates data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). This is a nationally representative large-scale longitudinal dataset which tracks a panel of British households and collects interview data annually.

Findings – The paper found a weak relationship between moving house and employment status. Long-distance migration had a different effect for males and females when prior employment was considered. There was not relationship between migration and female occupational position, but a small effect for men when the move was for reasons related to their own employment. Generally, migration had a positive effect on the family's social class position.

Practical implications – The paper illustrates that longitudinal data are highly beneficial for analyses of family migration as they provide a temporal location for the move.

Originality/value – This is an original set of analyses of contemporary large-scale nationally representative longitudinal data.

Keywords Family, Social stratification, Prelocation, Demographics, United Kingdom, Surveys

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

“Family migration” is a term which is often used to describe the process of couples, with or without children, moving long distances within nations. This is in contrast to the term “residential move” which is often deployed to describe short-distance household moves. A tacit assumption is that much of this long-distance migration will be for employment-related reasons. Traditionally, this was an employment change related to the man's career, rather than the woman's. However, in the contemporary labour market with an increasing proportion of women working and more dual-earner couples, it is increasingly plausible that families will move for reasons related to the female partner's career.

Early analyses of family migration were generally located within a human capital perspective. The overarching theoretical view being that long-distance moves were a response to job-related constraints at the place of origin and/or perceived job-related

The data used in this paper were supplied by the UK Economic and Social Data Service. The authors wish to thank Professor Nick Buck and the BHPS for their help and for granting special access to geographic information. The authors also wish to thank participants at the Cambridge Social Stratification Seminar for useful comments on a presentation of a version of this paper.

opportunities (or incentives) at the place of destination (Sjaastad, 1962; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Sandell, 1977; Mincer, 1978). Central to this view is the assumption that families tend towards rational economic behaviour and therefore that family migration will be to the benefit of the family unit as a whole, even if each partner in the couple does not benefit directly. Lichter (1983) concludes that families may move to follow the career of one (often male) partner because the sacrifice made by the trailing partner (usually female) is offset by the net gain to the family.

The term “tied migrant” or “trailing spouse” has been used to describe this phenomena. Empirical evidence generally supports the idea that long-distance family migration decreases the subsequent employment participation of women in couples who move with a male partner (e.g. Lichter, 1980; Long, 1974; Bielby and Bielby, 1992; Cooke and Bailey, 1996; Smits, 1999; Boyle *et al.*, 2002). Expressed succinctly, the probability of unemployment (or economic inactivity) is higher for migrating women who are in couples compared with female counterparts who do not move (Boyle *et al.*, 1999).

Halfacree (1995) describes this as an “unintentional gendering of family labour migration”. Studies have indicated that married couples move long distances less frequently than single people, and that dual-earner households migrate least (Böheim and Taylor, 2002; Nivalainen, 2004; van Ommeren *et al.*, 1999). It is plausible then that the migration decisions made by women in couples may be different to those made by other women (Morrison and Lichter, 1988).

Generally, the study of family migration has not been focused upon within stratification research. Our starting position is that it is conceivable that family migration could result in changing circumstances for the couple beyond simply changing their residential location or their labour market status. In particular, if the migration is motivated by employment (or career) related changes (or opportunities), we envisage that the worker may be moving into a more advantaged occupational position or the family may be moving into a more advantaged social class group. In particular, we are interested in migration within the UK rather than emigration (or international migration). This paper offers an exploration of the potential relationships between family migration (within the UK) and social stratification using contemporary longitudinal survey data.

2. Data

Buck (2000) highlights the general potential of using household panel data for the study of migration and illustrates the use of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The analyses presented in this paper use BHPS data, a large-scale nationally representative dataset (a detailed account of this dataset see is provided by Taylor *et al.*, 2006).

Our analysis uses an extract from the BHPS, which consists of women in couples whose family and migration histories have been wholly or partially recorded between the period 1992 and 2001. Our dataset comprises a panel of 4,491 women (29,349 observations) in couples (both married and cohabitating) aged 16 to 64. Data are collected annually through household and individual interviews. The panel begins in 1992 (BHPS wave B) and ends in 2001 (BHPS wave K) and contains approximately 2,600 women (in couples) at each annual wave. This is an unbalanced panel insofar as couples enter the panel either at the start of the survey or when their union formed, and leave the panel when their relationships dissolve, or the woman reaches the upper age limit, or if they exit the BHPS. Buck (2000) notes that although attrition rates are higher amongst migrants, the trace rate in the BHPS is high. Recently, Taylor (2006) has analysed a similar subset of the BHPS but with a focus specifically on “tied migration”

and Rabe (2006) has undertaken econometric analyses of migration effects for dual-earner couples using this survey.

This paper is largely exploratory and we confine our analyses to a restricted set of variables. We use a simple measure of whether the family moved house, and more detailed information on their reason for moving. In addition, we had access to a measures of “distance moved”, which is a specially constructed variable that is not deposited in the publicly available version of the BHPS. We are principally interested in three main outcomes, participation in employment, occupational position and family social class.

Across the panel 70 per cent (minimum 67 per cent in 1992; maximum 72 per cent in 2001) of women and 82 per cent of men (minimum 79 per cent in 1994; maximum 84 per cent in 2001) were in paid employment. In 63 per cent of households both partners worked, in 19 per cent of households only the male partner worked, in 7 per cent of households only the woman worked and in 11 per cent of households neither partner worked. Overall 10 per cent of these families move each year (minimum 8; maximum 11 per cent). The mean distance moved was 29 km. Twenty-five per cent of the families moved within 1 km and 50 per cent moved less than 5 km. The longest move was 747 km (from Scotland to the West Country).

3. Family migration and employment

Descriptions of the changing gender composition of the British labour market are legion. By the start of the twentieth century female employment, and the working-age employment rate for women, both stood at a record high level (see Duffield, 2002, especially Figure 2, which depicts the trend in male and female employment rates 1959-2000). It is plausible that the social and economic circumstances of couples have changed in ways that alter the relationships between family (or couple) migration and the female partner’s subsequent participation in the labour market. It is also plausible that the contemporary composition of the labour market has altered the previously observed relationships between family (or couple) migration and the female partner’s subsequent occupational position.

The majority of family moves were not made for employment-related reasons (see Table I). Six percent of moves were made for reasons related to the man’s employment but this does not provide overwhelming evidence of there being a large proportion of trailing female spouses in the 1990s. This result is broadly similar to Taylor (2006) who asserts that despite increasing equality between men and women in career attachment and labour market experiences, female partners are still more likely than male partners to be tied migrants. Clark and Withers (2002), analysing data from the USA, estimate that 10 to 15 per cent of all relocations are now for the married woman’s job. In this British dataset, we observed a lower proportion of moves that were related to female

Reason for move	%
Moved for both partners jobs	3
Moved for the man’s job	6
Moved for the woman’s job	4
Moved for other reason	87

Notes: $n = 2,846$; $p < 0.001$ (one sample chi-square)

Table I.
Reason for family move
(all movers all waves)

employment. However, if the longer term trend is one of increasing female participation in the workforce, it is plausible that in future this figure will increase.

In Table II, we report the relationship between moving house *per se* (including short-distance residential moves) and the partner’s participation in paid employment.

In this analysis, we classify the partner as being in paid employment if she did paid work in the week prior to the interview or did not work in the previous week but usually had a job. There is no evidence that moving house affects the female partner’s participation in paid employment. There is evidence that moving affects the male partner’s participation in employment (although the increase is small and the observed association is weak).

Most previous studies on family migration have relied on a long-distance move indicator (for example, often denoting a move of more than 50 km) as a proxy measure for an employment-related move. The underlying assumption is that when a move of this distance is made, the place of employment will necessarily change. At a superficial level, this is a plausible assumption and we note that the median distance moved was 43 km when the move was employment related (i.e. either for their own job, their male partner’s job or for both jobs) and 3 km when the move was for other (i.e. non-employment related) reasons.

At a descriptive level, there is some support for the idea that long-distance family migration affects the female partner’s subsequent employment activity (Table III), although we are keen to note that the association is weak. In general, however, this concurs with early, and often cited, studies such as Mincer (1978) and Sandell (1977). These studies conclude that the effect of migration on married women is to reduce their post-migration labour force participation. At the same time, we observe a smaller decrease in male participation and again a weak association between employment activity and long-distance migration.

Table II.
Employment activity
and moving home

		No move in the last 12 months (%)	Family moved in the last 12 months (%)
Females	Not employed	30	31
	Employed	70	69
Males	Not employed	18	16
	Employed	82	84

Notes: Females *n* ¼ 29,349; *p* ¼ 0.23. Males *n* ¼ 26,987; *p* ¼ 0.02; *V* ¼ 0.01

Table III.
Employment activity
and long-distance family
migration

		No move/short-distance move (<50 km) in the last 12 months (%)	Long-distance (50 km+) move in the last 12 months (%)
Females	Not employed	30	39
	Employed	70	61
Males	Not employed	18	23
	Employed	82	77

Notes: Females *n* ¼ 29,349; *p* < 0.01; *V* ¼ 0.02; Males *n* ¼ 26,987; *p* < 0.02; *V* ¼ 0.01

The panel element of the BHPS allows us to explicitly consider employment status in both the current wave and the previous wave of the survey. This feature of the data allows us to place the couple’s move (between survey waves) in a more appropriate temporal ordering. It extends the analysis in a way that would not be possible with cross-sectional survey data.

The results in Tables IV and V highlight the relationship between current employment activity and employment activity in the previous wave of the survey.

We first turn our attention to the male partners. There was a strong degree of stability in employment status between waves for men whose families did not move or who moved a short distance ($V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.81). A modest proportion of men entered paid employment and a very small proportion left paid employment. There was a weaker association in employment status between waves for men whose families made a long-distance (50 kmþ) move ($V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.63). Twenty-four per cent of men who previously were not employed became employed after making a long-distance family move, compared to only 14 per cent of their counterparts who did not make a long-distance move. It appears that making a long-distance move was beneficial for these men. Conversely, 10 per cent of men who had been employed were not employed after making a long-distance (50 kmþ) move compared to only 4 per cent of counterparts who did not make such a move.

The pattern for females is different (see Table V). There was a strong degree of stability in employment status between waves for women whose families did not move or who moved a short distance ($V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.76). A modest proportion of women entered paid employment and a smaller proportion left paid employment. There was a weaker association in employment status between waves for women whose families made a long-distance (50 kmþ) move ($V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.46). This association is also weaker than the related association for men moving a long distance (see Table IV). Twenty-eight

	Current wave	Previous wave	
		Not employed (%)	Employed (%)
Non/short-distance movers	Not employed	86	04
	Employed	14	96
Long-distance (50 km+) movers	Not employed	76	10
	Employed	24	90

Notes: Non/short-distance movers $n \frac{1}{4}$ 22,070; $p < 0.001$; $V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.81; long-distance movers $n \frac{1}{4}$ 310; $p < 0.001$; $V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.63

Table IV.
Men’s employment
activity, previous
employment activity and
long-distance family
migration

	Current wave	Previous wave	
		Not employed (%)	Employed (%)
Non/short-distance movers	Not employed	84	07
	Employed	16	93
Long-distance (50 km+) movers	Not employed	72	25
	Employed	28	75

Notes: Non/short-distance movers $n \frac{1}{4}$ 24,508; $p < 0.001$; $V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.76; long-distance movers $n \frac{1}{4}$ 350; $p < 0.001$; $V \frac{1}{4}$ 0.46

Table V.
Women’s employment
activity, previous
employment activity and
long-distance family
migration

per cent of women who previously were not employed became employed after making a long-distance family move. This is similar to the positive effect of long-distance migration observed for males (i.e. 24 per cent). We are conscious that Duncan and Perucci (1976) suggested that for those women who were out of the labour market prior to migrating, but searching for employment, the effects of family migration on employment can actually be positive.

What is more striking is that 25 per cent of women who had been employed were not employed after making a long-distance (50 kmþ) move, compared to only 10 per cent of males. This result lends some support to the established claim that long-distance family migration can lower the female partner’s probability of employment. However there is a minor limitation to the results presented here. The tables above use a dataset, which pools multiple records from the same women. In subsequent analyses, we control for the potential effects of multiple records.

Finally, before moving on to analysis of the occupational position, we would like to note that we are also mildly sceptical about the appropriateness of the usual long-distance move (50 kmþ) measure as a proxy measure for an employment-related move. In Table VI, we report that a high proportion of long-distance moved are not for employment-related reasons. Therefore in the remainder of the analyses, we concentrate on information relating to reason for the couple’s move.

4. Occupational position and family migration

In this section, we examine the possible effects of family migration on occupational positions. We concentrate on the Cambridge Scale score as the measure of occupational position (see Prandy, 1990). We first examine the effects of family migration on the woman’s occupational position.

In this dataset, the mean female Cambridge Scale score of currently employed women is 39 (*n* ¼ 20,514; SD ¼ 18; minimum 1; maximum 99). As we expected, there is a strong correlation between a woman’s Cambridge Scale score in the current BHPS wave and her Cambridge Scale score in the previous BHPS wave if she was working in both waves (*r* ¼ 0.85). The mean difference in scores between pairs of BHPS waves is 0.32 (SD ¼ 10; maximum positive change ¼ 62; maximum negative chang ¼ -65)[1].

We examine the effects of the different reasons for family migration on the change in the female partner’s Cambridge Scale score between pairs of BHPS waves. The results reported in Table VII indicate that migration for any employment reason does not have a significant effect on the change in Cambridge Scale score between pairs of BHPS waves. Moving for a reason other than employment does however significantly increase the woman’s Cambridge Scale score by a very small amount. With the data that are available we cannot suggest any obvious substantive reason why this should be the case however.

Reason for move	%
Moved for both partner’s jobs	10
Moved for the man’s job	19
Moved for the woman’s job	10
Moved for other reasons	61

Notes: *n* ¼ 479; *p* <0.001 (one sample chi-square)

Table VI.
Long-distance movers
(50 kmþ) by main
reason for move

In the case of tied migrants (i.e. women who move for a reason related to their male partner’s employment), we might reasonably expect a decline in occupational position (Boyle *et al.*, 1999), however this is not observed in these data. Conversely, human capital theories would suggest that a move related to the woman’s employment should lead to an increase in occupational position, which again is not observed in these data. Given current trends in employment we see no reason to assume a future decline in dual-earner households in Britain. Therefore, the finding that both a move for a reason related to the woman’s employment and a move for reasons related to both partners’ employment do not significantly improve the woman’s occupational position is worthy of note.

We now turn our attention to the male partners. In this dataset, the mean male Cambridge Scale score of currently employed men is 35 (*n* ¼ 21,898; SD ¼ 20; minimum 1; maximum 90). As we expected, there is a strong correlation between a man’s Cambridge Scale score in the current BHPS wave and his Cambridge Scale score in the previous BHPS wave if he was working in both waves (*r* ¼ 0.86). The mean difference in scores between pairs of BHPS waves is 0.13 (SD ¼ 10; maximum positive change ¼ 67; maximum negative change ¼ -63).

We examine the effects of the different reasons for family migration on the change in the male partner’s Cambridge Scale score. The results reported in Table VIII indicate that migration for reasons relating to both partners and the woman’s employment do

	β	Robust SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
Non-movers	0	–	–	–	–	–
Reason for move						
For both jobs	0.66	1.25	0.53	0.60	-1.78	3.11
For woman’s job	-0.96	1.45	-0.66	0.51	-3.80	1.88
For man’s job	0.09	1.11	0.08	0.94	-2.08	2.26
Other reasons	0.92	0.30	3.08	0.01	0.33	1.51
Constant	0.26	0.05	5.52	0.01	0.17	0.35

Notes: *n* ¼ 16,189 observations; 2,994 women; *R*² ¼ 0.01. These results are from a standard cross-sectional multiple regression model and are identical to the results that are obtained when a panel model is fitted to these data (for the panel model *p* ¼ 0). We use robust SE to provide increased control for clustering (i.e. multiple observations from the same individual)

Table VII.
Regression model for
change in female
Cambridge Scale scores
between waves, women
workers

	β	Robust SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
Non-movers	0	–	–	–	–	–
Reason for move						
For both jobs	1.28	1.66	0.77	0.44	-1.98	4.54
For woman’s job	-0.07	2.49	-0.03	0.98	-4.95	4.82
For man’s job	3.33	1.00	3.33	0.00	1.37	5.28
Other reasons	0.07	0.35	0.21	0.83	-0.61	0.76
Constant	0.09	0.05	1.93	0.05	0.00	0.19

Notes: *n* ¼ 17,474 observations; 3,045 men; *R*² ¼ 0.01. These results are from a standard cross-sectional multiple regression model and are identical to the results that are obtained when a panel model is fitted to these data (for the panel model *p* ¼ 0). We use robust SE to provide increased control for clustering (i.e. multiple observations from the same individual)

Table VIII.
Regression model for
change in male
Cambridge Scale scores
between waves, male
workers

not have a significant effect on the change in Cambridge Scale score between BHPS waves. But, moving for an employment reason related to the man’s job does have a small positive significant effect (i.e. on average an increase of three points on the Cambridge Scale score). This observed improvement, albeit small, in occupational position chimes within the overall theoretical view that job-related moves are made as a rational economic response.

5. Family social class and migration

In this section, we examine the potential effects of migration on the couple’s social class position. The couple’s combined social class measure is the highest Registrar General’s social class category of the two partners (this approach is informed by earlier sociological work, Erikson, 1984).

The results in Table IX indicate that, as we might expect, there is a strong association between a couple’s social class position (measured by the highest class of either partner) between BHPS waves. There is a slightly weaker association for long-distance migrants. This chimes with the theoretical idea that long-distance moves are associated with changes of workplace. There is a strong association between a couple’s social class position between pairs of waves when the move is for employment reasons, but also when the move is for reasons other than employment.

We now turn our attention to migration and the direction of change in the couple’s social class position between pairs of waves. Table X reports the results of a multinomial logistic regression model. The model first compares the chances of moving up at least one Registrar General’s social class category as opposed to staying in the same category. Overall, migration has a positive effect, and movers have an increased chance of moving into a higher Registrar General’s social class category. However, those couples who move for reasons related to both partner’s jobs are not significantly different to non-movers. These results accord with the more general idea that families are making a rational (or economic) decision and are moving to better or more advantaged jobs.

The second part of the model compares the chances of moving down at least one Registrar General’s social class category as opposed to staying in the same category. Here, we observe that migrating for employment-related reasons does not significantly affect the family’s chances of moving to a lower Registrar General’s social class category. Once again, these results accord with the more general idea that families are making a rational (or economic) decision and would not be moving to worse or less advantaged jobs. We note however, that those families migrating for reasons other than employment have significantly greater chances of moving to a lower Registrar General’s social class

Table IX.
Measures of association –
family class position
(Registrar General’s
scheme), between waves

Non-movers	0.87
All movers	0.79
Non-movers and movers <50 km	0.86
50 km þ mover	0.74
Non-movers	0.87
Moved for both partner’s jobs	0.84
Moved for female partner’s job	0.76
Moved for male partner’s job	0.74
Moved for reasons of than employment	0.79

	Moved up at least one social class category					
	β	Robust SE	t	p	95% CI	
Non-movers	0	—	—	—	—	—
Moved for both partner's jobs	0.36	0.34	1.07	0.29	-0.30	1.02
Moved for female partner's job	0.83	0.30	2.73	0.01	0.23	1.42
Moved for male partner's job	0.72	0.21	3.38	0.00	0.30	1.13
Moved for reasons other than employment	0.42	0.08	5.59	0.00	0.28	0.57
Constant	-1.85	0.03	-72.10	0.00	-1.90	-1.80
<i>Moved down at least one social class category</i>						
Non-movers	0	—	—	—	—	—
Moved for both partner's jobs	0.18	0.35	0.52	0.61	-0.50	0.86
Moved for female partner's job	0.51	0.35	1.46	0.15	-0.18	1.20
Moved for male partner's job	-0.28	0.31	-0.90	0.37	-0.88	0.32
Moved for reasons other than employment	0.36	0.08	4.63	0.00	0.21	0.51
Constant	-1.87	0.03	-72.17	0.00	-1.92	-1.82

Notes: $n \frac{1}{4}$ 21,176 observations; 3,500 families; pseudo $R^2 \frac{1}{4}$ 0.01

Table X.
Multinomial regression
for change in family
class position (Registrar
General's scheme) and
migration

category. For these families, the move is not motivated by either partner's career (or job) and we speculate that these families are therefore more willing to downshift.

6. Conclusion

The analyses above are a first attempt at exploring possible relationships between migration and social stratification. We have undertaken analyses of contemporary data from a British household survey. We have demonstrated that the panel element of these data are useful in terms of better providing a temporal (or sequential) positioning of the family move.

We observed that most moves were not motivated by employment. We observed a weak relationship between employment activity and moving house for males but no relationship for women. There were weak associations between long-distance migration (50 kmþ) and employment activity for both females and males.

Long-distance migration could have both a positive and a negative effect for men. Twenty four per cent of men who previously were not employed became employed after making a long-distance family move, compared to only 14 per cent of their counterparts who did not move a long distance. Whilst making a long-distance move appears beneficial for some men, 10 per cent of men who had been employed were not employed after making a long-distance (50 km+) move compared with only 4 per cent who did not make a long-distance move.

Twenty eight percent of women who previously were not employed became employed after making a long-distance family move. This is similar to the positive effect of long-distance migration observed for males. By contrast, 25 per cent of women who were previously employed were not employed following a long-distance move. Arguably, whilst making a long-distance move appears beneficial for some women it also has a more marked negative effect than it does for men.

The analyses above indicate that migration does not have any obvious effects on occupational position for women, but moves related to the man's job (or career) have a small positive effect on their occupational position. As we might expect, there is a high degree of social class stability (measured by the Registrar General's classification)

between pairs of the annual waves of the survey. There is evidence that migration for employment reasons significantly improves the chances that the family will move up the social class scheme. As we might expect, there is no evidence that migration for employment reasons significantly improves the chances that the family will move down the class scheme. We consider that these results chime with the theoretical idea that couples will make rational (or economic) decisions about migration, and whilst they are likely to move to improved occupational circumstances they are generally unlikely to move into worse positions.

We envisage that with both changes in the labour market and the changes in the structure and organisation of family life (especially the rise in dual-earner households), the migration decisions that couples make will be increasingly complex. In particular, we expect that there will be smaller numbers of female “trailing spouses” in contemporary families. Through this exploratory analysis, we have reached the conclusion that there are some potentially interesting, and hitherto unexplored, relationships between family migration and social stratification.

Note

1. To better illustrate this, the maximum change was for a woman who changed jobs in the construction industry. The maximum negative change was for a woman who moved from being a social worker to a factory worker between a pair of waves.

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